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Beyond Measure: Rescuing an Overscheduled, Overtested, Underestimated Generation

Vicki Abeles, 2015
New York, New York: Simon & Schuster

Reviewed by Ryan G. Hawkins


Recently, the definition of academic success has come under increasing levels of scrutiny. High grades, good test scores, and receiving an acceptance letter from an elite college are the marks of success in the classroom. All of this is done in the name of what Abeles labels the “application arms race.” Outside of the classroom, students are expected to be a part of countless co-curricular activities aimed at bolstering their resume and college application packets all the while doing hours of homework which keeps them up until midnight or later. According to Vicki Abeles, the never-ending quest for success is having a damaging effect on the mental health and overall well-being of youth in the United States. Abeles, a former attorney turned documentary filmmaker, did extensive and thorough research and put together numerous examples of the harm happening at the current level of pressure to succeed in her popular 2010 documentary, *Race to Nowhere*. In *Beyond Measure: Rescuing an Overscheduled, Overtested, Underestimated Generation*, Abeles does three things: she suggests that this narrow view of success is doing a great deal of harm to children, families, and communities; she contends that what causes the harm is unacceptable; and she suggests things that can be done by educators, parents, and communities to help our nation’s youth escape the dangers of “high stakes childhood” to have a healthy childhood.

The book is divided into eight chapters set between a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue provides the reader with an answer to the question of why the book was necessary as a follow up to *Race to Nowhere*. The first chapter provides a primer to the issues surrounding the emotional and physical harm Abeles sees in the current system of achievement on the present generation of children. In the second chapter, Abeles proposes that the overall way to help children is to give them more unstructured time outside of school and to use their time in school more effectively.

The next four chapters outline the remedies Abeles sees for restoring school-life balance to our nation's youth. Each of the chapters provides findings from research and first hand accounts to back up its claim. The chapters end with examples of what is being done to remedy the problem. The topics covered in chapters three through six include homework, testing, college admissions, and finally, better strategies for teaching and learning. The book finishes with a plea to be mindful of the over all well-being of children and not just be concerned with their academics. The final chapter offers suggestions on how to put the book's material into practice. The book closes with an epilogue in which Abeles speaks of a number of stories about students who have found joy in their academics. Abeles also describes where she wants her work to grow and be of help to even more students, parents, and schools.

Abeles uses a mixture of formal medical and psychological research and studies with stories and interviews to make her point that the current atmosphere of perfectionism and achievement is harmful to the nation's children. The weight and use of formal research and stories from her interviews and events is far from balanced. Chapters begin with a couple of pages filled with research studies that have been done, and then the bulk of the chapter is filled with stories about why the topic of the chapter is a problem and what has and can be done to help students, families, or schools with the issue. There are times in the book when it even seems that Abeles disregards the evidence gathered from research in favor of making her point from the stories she has collected. For example, early in the book Abeles addresses the issue that academic stress is an issue for all children, not just privileged kids. She begins by summarizing the results of a study which found that kids from upper middle class families are more likely to show signs of anxiety and other mental health concerns due to stress. Abeles then goes on to sum up several interviews she conducted that seem to refute the findings of the research study in a tone that seems to point to a belief that this anecdotal evidence outweighs psychological research. All that to say, it is important to note that this book is a persuasive piece, written by a documentarian trying to make a point and not a researcher trying not to bring her bias to bear in her writing.

The greatest strength of the book is that while Abeles sees the issue of the “application arms race” as a universal problem in American schools, she does not provide universal suggestions on how to end the issues behind the problem that will work everywhere. The suggestions Abeles gives, particularly in chapter eight, are general enough that educators can take the principles in the book and contextualize if and how they are applicable in specific contexts. This is an especially important point for higher education professionals to take away from this book, because most of the practical suggestions are aimed at the K-12 educator or parents and not the college educator or administrator.

While the book does not deal with college student development issues directly and is not written through the lens of the Christian faith, Christian student development professionals could still benefit a great deal from reading it. Many of the students that enter our institutions, residence halls, and student programs have come out of an atmosphere that emphasized grades and getting into the best of the next stage of life as the definition of success. *Beyond Measure* can give student development professionals a better understanding of that way of thinking and the dangers it may have on the well-being of our students. Furthermore, it is a much needed reminder that many of our students are coming to our campuses putting their primary identity in places other than in Christ and may be in need of a certain degree of spiritual counsel on identity and motivation. All in all, the book is not aimed at the student development educator, but there is a lot we can learn about the mindset of students from it, especially those who work regularly with freshmen. 

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